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Warnke Confirmation Seen Virtually Certain Despite Critics

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Some White House officials are describing the nomination of Paul Warnke to head the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency as a crucial test of the new administration's nerve and muscle, a rite of passage.

If Warnke is rejected by the Senate, they say, the Carter administration will be irreparably weakened in its dealings with Congress, having lost a second nomination battle after the forced withdrawal of President Carter's choice to head the Central Intelligence Agency, Theodore C. Sorensen.

One of the reasons the White House is happy to attach such touches of drama to the nomination is that in the absence of any surprise developments Warnke seems certain to be confirmed.

His confirmation, the White House hopes, will rub away the lingering pain from the Sorensen defeat.

Senate Majority Leader Robert C.

Byrd (D-W.Va.) said yesterday that although "there are some problems" in the Senate, "as of today, the nomination would be confirmed." Other Senate veterans predicted Warnke would win approval by a comfortable majority.

Eager for that success and at the urging of Warnke supporters in Congress, the White House jumped Warnke's name ahead of dozens of others awaiting White House clearance.

The nomination was sent to the Senate Friday, and the Foreign Relations Committee, which had no other business on tap for its regular meeting this week, immediately scheduled Warnke's confirmation hearing for Tuesday.

Warnke is expected to win near-unanimous approval from the committee. Whatever troubles his nomination faces will come either if the Armed Services Committee follows through on the desire of some members to invite Warnke to testify or when the nomination reaches the Senate floor.

If senators like Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.), Sam. Nunn (D-Ga.) and Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.) choose to mount a major challenge to Warnke, then the nomination will provide the first major debate in this administration on U.S. strategic policy.

"Maybe this is a good time to go ahead and have a national debate on this issue," a Warnke supporter said last week. "After the reports of hawks vs. doves, leaked CIA reports, the formation of a Committee on the Present Danger and statements by retired Air Force generals," he said, "a nice, big, fat airing of the whole thing might be a good idea."

The Committee on the Present Danger was formed last year by a number of experienced national security affairs hands to warn that the Soviet Union was surpassing the United States in military strength.

Leaks about a panel of outside experts called Team B which criticized the CIA estimates of Soviet military strength and intentions and warnings from retired Maj. Gen. George J. Keegan, former head of Air Force intelligence, have also fueled the debate over strategic arms.

Warnke's critics believe that he is too ready to cancel U.S. weapons systems and that he would allow the strategic balance to tip too far in Moscow's favor.

"This is a good time to debate the issues," a Senate foe of Warnke's views said last week. "The basic problem," he added "is that it seems from his writings that the strategic balance doesn't matter very much."

Warnke has written: "To conclude that we must overcome every Soviet lead despite its lack of military meaning is to accept the rule of illogic."

Several senators have expressed concern about his views, but even Jackson has remained neutral, saying he wants to hear Warnke before deciding how he will vote.

Unlike Sorensen, Warnke is well-liked on Capitol Hill—even by people who disagree with him. He is a law partner of former Defense Secretary

Clark Clifford, and is a former assistant secretary of defense.

Also unlike Sorensen, Warnke will have the full support of President Carter.

The President has called him "the best man in the country for the job" and described the nomination as "crucial" to his administration.